

The Foot of the Cross

Nearness to the Cross

By Octavius Winslow

"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." John 19:25

It was a mournful yet an unspeakably precious and enviable spot around which now clustered these holy watchers! They had been to our Lord as ministering spirits in many an hour of weariness and need. With true feminine delicacy, they had followed Him, silently and meekly, in the distance, approaching His person but to receive from Him a blessing or to bestow upon Him a charity. Their love was not ostentatious, nor were their attentions officious and wearying. Gentle, yet softening as the dew- silent, yet cheering as the sunbeam, they hovered around His lone and dreary path, shedding upon it the luster and the soothing of their holy sympathy, and in seasons of sinking necessity and exhausting toil, "ministering to Him of their substance." And now that His disciples, pledged and sworn to a friendship and faithfulness unto death, had, in the dark hour of His woe, one by one all forsaken Him, these holy women drew near and took their position as sentinels at the cross, watching the descending sun of His life, as, amid suffering, darkness, and blood, it set in death. But a deeper love and a higher life than nature owns had brought them here. Christ had wrought wonders of grace for these women. They were lost, and He had found them; sinners, and He had saved them. Their sins He was now bearing, their curse He was now exhausting, their penalty of suffering He was now enduring. For them were these agonies, this soul-sorrow, this blood-shedding, and this death. And now that He was afflicted of God, tortured of man, deserted by friends, insulted by foes, lo! amid the darkness and the earthquake, the insults and the imprecations, "there stood by the cross of Jesus; His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene." Honored women! envied spot! But how suggestive in its spiritual instruction is this scene! To its study let us devoutly turn.

Although eighteen hundred years have elapsed since that scene occurred, the believer in Jesus still spiritually lives it over. The cross of Christ is still the central object of attraction to the Church of God. Around it in faith and love a countless throng daily, hourly gather of Christ-believing, Christ-loving souls, finding cleansing in its blood, extracting joy from its sorrow, deriving life from its death, and beholding the brightness of glory blended with the darkness of shame.

But is this the true spiritual position and posture of every believer in Jesus? Are all the professed disciples of the Savior seeking and cultivating the religion that is drawn only from, and is cherished only by, close communion with the cross of Christ? Are we walking with God in a sense of pardoned sin, of personal acceptance, of filial communion, of holy obedience, of unreserved consecration beneath the cross? Do we delight to be here? Do we resort there that grace might be replenished, that the fruits of the Spirit might be nourished, that backslidings might be healed, that the conscience might be cleansed? Is the cross of Jesus our confessional, our laver, our crucifixion, and our boast? These are searching, solemn questions! Persuaded, as we are, that the foot of the cross is the nearest spot to Heaven, that Heaven's choicest blessings are found only there; that, beneath its warm sunshine the holy fruit of the Spirit ripens, and that under its sacred shade the sweetest repose is

found; that, never is the believing soul so near to God, in such intimate fellowship with Christ, more really under the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit, as when there, we would sincerely employ every scriptural argument and put forth every persuasive motive to allure the reader to this hallowed spot, assured that, once he finds himself in believing, loving adoration at the foot of Christ's cross, he has found himself at the focus of all divine glory, and at the confluence of all spiritual blessing.

A few words of explanation in the outset. The foot of the cross! What do we mean by the words? Literally, the cross was an ancient instrument of torture among the Romans, to which only those were subjected who were considered by the state as the greatest and most ignominious malefactors. To be crucified was considered a mark of ineffable infamy and disgrace, and its death one of lingering and indescribable agony. Such was the nature, character, and instrument of our Lord's death! Jesus of Nazareth was crucified upon a tree. The Son of God, suspended between two malefactors, died the accursed death of the cross, voluntarily enduring its torture, and uncomplainingly submitting to its infamy- to such suffering and abasement could incarnate love stoop! Hence the frequent expression of the Bible, "The cross of Christ."

Symbolically, the cross of Christ represents the doctrine of the cross, and is an expression equivalent to the atonement of the Son of God, by which we, who were once at variance with God, rebels against His being, government, and truth, are now reconciled, brought into a state of at-one-ment with Jehovah. Thus, "we who some time were afar off, are made near by the blood of Christ."

But, spiritually, we understand by the expression the believer's close realization of the moral power of the cross, his fellowship with Christ in His sufferings, and the believing, lowly posture of the soul at the spot where concentrate the blessings of grace here, and where bloom the first fruits of glory hereafter.

The spiritually depressed state of the soul which this position meets, is more

serious and prevalent than is generally suspected by the saints of God. There is no part of the circumference of divine truth or of Christian experience so remote from Christ the center, at which the believer may not at some period of his course find himself in his unsuspected wanderings. The planet revolving round the sun, the needle pointing to the pole, have not a stronger tendency to oscillate from the center of attraction, than the renewed soul to recede to a remote distance from Jesus. Nearness to the cross! -alas! it is the exception and not the rule. Standing by the cross! -it is the privileged position of the few and not the many. The world, in some one, or all, of its many forms of power- the creature, in its unsuspected yet insinuating influence- unbelief, in its latent yet ever-potent force- sin, in its indwelling and ever-working sway, allures the soul from the cross. And so the Christian disciple, unconscious of the spiritual declension of his heart from Christ, finds himself moving in a distant orbit, cold, and dreary, far remote from the warm, genial influence of the Sun beneath whose divine beams he was wont so joyously to bask in the days of his "first love." "And Peter followed Him afar off." And in that distant walk, that orbit far removed from the Divine Center, that starting off to the utmost limit of departure, he had become a wandering and a blasted star forever- as he was an eclipsed constellation for the moment- but for the power of God that kept him, and the Savior's love that interceded for him, and the divine grace that restored him. That distance of walk led to his denial of his Lord. To what deep declension must the work of the Holy Spirit in his soul have sunk to have issued in an event in his spiritual history so appalling, and in a crime against his Savior so great! There is no security, as there is no enjoyment, of the believer in the distance of his soul from the cross. We tread enchanted ground when we walk where the sanctifying power of the cross is not recognized and felt. Jesus is not known, His cross is not recognized, His love is not felt in the walks of worldly gaiety and in the haunts of carnal pleasure. These things are divided from the cross by a wide and ever-separating gulf. You cannot, my reader, mingle with the world and maintain at the same time spiritual nearness to the cross. The cross is the crucifier of the world, the death of sin. Beneath its awful shadow, brought to its sacred foot, the world's glory pales, sin's power is paralyzed, and Satan, the arch-tempter, recoiling from its brightness and writhing beneath its death-bruise, relinquishes his victim, and retires, defeated and dishonored, to his own place.

The inquiry naturally arises in this part of our subject, What are some of THE EVIDENCES OF NEARNESS TO THE CROSS? In other words, What are the true tests by which the believer may ascertain the spiritual position of his soul? Without anticipating subsequent parts of this volume, let a few words suffice to meet this inquiry.

The first we quote is, ardent love to Jesus. The cross, rugged and gory, heavy and offensive, possesses no beauty or attraction apart from Him who was nailed to its wood. That which makes Calvary the most hallowed spot to the believer, and the cross the most attractive spectacle on earth, is the wonderful Being who there poured out His soul unto death, a self-consumed victim amid the fires of

His own love. "Zeal for your house will consume me." Associated with a Redeemer so divine, with a salvation so stupendous, with sufferings so unparalleled, with a death so atoning, with a heaven so glorious, with a fact so strange- the Sinless condemned, that the guilty might go free; the Blessed bearing the curse, that the accursed might bear the blessing; the Living dying, that the dead might live; the Glorious covered with shame, that the abased might be covered with glory; Christ enduring our hell, that we might enjoy His heaven-blended, we say, with transfers so strange and with blessings so precious, it is not surprising the warm and supreme attachment of the believer to Him who died upon the cross. Here, then, is a true test of your soul's nearness to the cross. Love to Jesus will sweetly attract and powerfully detain you there, in devout, adoring contemplation. To him who has no love to Christ, the cross of Christ has no attraction. A heart chilled in its affection to the Savior will wander away in quest of objects more congenial with its carnal taste. A trifle, a shadow, anything the most childish and insignificant, will win and gratify a heart upon whose affections Christ has no hold. Oh, it is astonishing what straws men will gather, and what phantoms they will chase, when the soul's center is not the cross of Jesus!

What, beloved, is the state of your heart's love to Christ? Turn not from the inquiry, shrink not from the scrutiny. The fervor of its love will be the measure of your soul's nearness to the cross. Love to Christ will bring you into frequent and close fellowship with Him in suffering; and with a heart often sequestered from the world, and cloistered amid the hallowed gloom of Gethsemane- at home with Christ in suffering- the position of your soul will be that of the holy Mary's, standing by the cross of Jesus.

Attachment to the doctrines of the cross may be regarded as a test of the believer's spiritual nearness to the Crucified. A lessening of love to the person of Jesus will invariably be followed by a lessening of love to the truth as it is in Jesus. Christ is the truth. The truth and Christ are one and indivisible. There can be no real, certainly no healthy, vigorous love to the person of Christ where there exists a latent laxity of opinion respecting the gospel of Christ. Christ and His gospel stand or fall, rise or sink together. "In vain you love Me," might the Savior say, "while you undervalue my words. My doctrine is divine, and he that rejects my words rejects Me." What, then, is your attachment to the gospel of Christ? Is it increasingly precious to your soul, sanctifying to your heart, influential in your life? Would you bid high for the truth of Jesus at any cost of personal ease and worldly advantage, and sell it not for earth's richest gem?

Do you increasingly love it because it searches, rebukes, abases you, and yet strengthens, comforts, and sanctifies you? Do you feel a growing love for those doctrines that are especially identical with, that spring from, that are found beneath, and that lead the soul to, the cross of Jesus? Thus may you test the proximity of your soul to the Crucified. Christ precious to you, oh, how precious will be the truth He taught! Purer than the purest silver, richer than the richest

gold, sweeter than the sweetest honey, lovelier than the fairest gem, will be to you those doctrines, precepts, and promises which your Lord and Savior embodied in His teachings, and enjoined upon your simple faith, your fervent love, your holy walk, your zealous dissemination, and, if need be, your testimony at the martyr's stake. The doctrine of the substitutionary offering, the expiatory suffering, the atoning blood, the imputed righteousness of Christ, all based upon, and deriving their virtue, their power, and their efficacy from, the divine dignity and spotless holiness of His person, will be entwined with your increasing love and unswerving faith.

The precepts which enjoin your bearing Christ's cross, your confession of His name, your self-denying service in His cause, your crucifixion to the world, and your simple, unreserved obedience to His commands, will be to you His easy yoke and His lightsome burden. Test, then, your spiritual nearness to the cross by your ardent attachment to the doctrines of the cross. "If any man will do His will, He shall know of the doctrine." "O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." "How sweet are your words unto my taste! yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth." "Your words were found, and I did eat them; and your word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."

Loyalty to Christ is another evidence of nearness to the cross. Disloyalty to the Savior and His truth creates an immeasurable distance between Christ and the soul. Any, the slightest, compromise with error, with the world, with sin, with the enemies of the cross, is disloyalty to the Headship, the Crown, the Person, and the Gospel of the Son of God. No proof is more unmistakable of a receding from the cross, of a distance of the heart from Jesus, than infidelity to His person, government, and truth. Peter compromised his loyalty to Christ when he followed his Master 'afar off.' He disowned and denied Jesus, forswore and renounced allegiance to his Savior, when he followed Him at a distance to the hall of judgment, and then took his place among His enemies. Let but your love to Jesus wane, your faith in His Word relax, your attachment to His cause lessen, your interest in His people decline, and you are fast becoming a disloyal subject of that Sovereign whose person you professed to love, whose truth you affirmed to believe, whose cause you swore to defend, whose fortunes and whose kingdom you avowed to follow and promote until death. Oh, be loyal to Christ! -to the glory of His person, to the divinity of His truth, to the interests of His Church, to the rights of His crown, to the honor of His name! "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Fidelity to God will not render you less, but all the more, faithful to man. You will not be less fitted for the relations and duties of the life that now is, but all the more competent, because daily advancing in fitness for the life that is to come. Let stern, uncompromising fidelity to Christ, then, evidence the closeness of your fellowship with Him in His sufferings. Keep that impressive spectacle ever in view- the dying of the Lord Jesus in your stead- and the foe that would tamper with your loyalty to the Savior will be disarmed of his power, and, like unto the

noble army of martyrs, you will "overcome him by the blood of the Lamb."

We will supply but another test of your close communion with the Crucified- the spiritual barometer of the soul. Nothing will more satisfactorily indicate your exact position in relation to the cross than the state of your spiritual life. The divine life in the soul flourishes or decays, is vigorous or sickly, in exact proportion to its proximity to the cross of Jesus. As Christ is our life, so our life must be sustained by Christ. If your Christianity is healthy; your breathings after God and holiness and heaven deep and fervent; your love to Jesus constant and intense; and you are aiming to walk after the simplicity of Christ, bringing every thought into obedience to Him, then you may safely infer that you stand spiritually, where stood literally the holy women- close by the cross of Jesus. Here alone spiritual religion flourishes. Here only the believing soul is as a well-watered garden. If, as the naturalist tells us, beneath the Upas tree all natural life expires, it may with more significance be affirmed that beneath the cross of Jesus all spiritual life lives.

"There stood by the cross of Jesus- His mother." Significant and touching words! -replete with teaching and with tenderness. Who can portray that scene? who describe the love of that Son- the sorrow of that mother? Such a Son! Such a mother! The love of Jesus was now illustrating its greatness by the vastness of its achievement- the salvation of His Church; and its tenderness in that gentle look of affection which He bent upon the woman who stood by His cross in all the depth and constancy of a mother's love.

But we turn from a scene which distances all human description, to you, my reader. It is possible that your present position bears some resemblance to this. You may be watching by the couch of a suffering, dying one, whom you deeply, tenderly love- perchance, love as a parent, yes, as a mother only can. Take your place with Mary- by the

cross of Jesus. There meet and blend suffering and love, sorrow and sympathy. Standing in faith by the cross, you are near the suffering Savior, the loving Son, the sympathizing Brother born for your present grief. Jesus, in the depth and tenderness of His love, is at this moment all that He was when, in soul-travail, He cast that ineffable look of filial love and sympathy upon His anguished mother. He can enter into your circumstances, understand your grief, sustain and soothe your spirit as one only can who has partaken of the cup of woe which now trembles in your hand. Drink that cup submissive to His will, for He drank deeply of it before you, and has left the fragrance of His sympathy upon its brim. Your sorrow is not new to Christ.

He can embosom Himself in a parent's grief as no other being could. He knows a mother's heart, compassionates a mother's sorrow. You may be sorrowing for a child, perhaps over his folly, his waywardness, his sin; or, you are watching by your child's couch of weakness, or the bed of suffering, or the pillow of death. Oh,

is there a place more appropriate for you as a smitten parent, a mourning mother, a spirit overwhelmed with anguish, hope and fear alternately struggling in your breast, watching the languor which you cannot rouse, the sufferings you cannot relieve, the disease you cannot avert, the advancing foe you cannot arrest, the approaching wretch you cannot avert. Is there a spot where your spirit will be more calmed, your heart more comforted, your will more subdued, your soul more strengthened, your mind more sweetly responsive to the words of Jesus, "Your will be done," than beneath the cross? Close to it stand, believing, loving, clinging, until this calamity be overpast.

There grace will be given you to bear this crushing trial, strength to pass through this weary watching, love to sustain this bitter anguish, sympathy to soften and to soothe this hour of sad and final parting. Mourning, sorrowing mother! Jesus invites you to His sheltering, soothing cross, "Come, my people, enter into your chambers, and shut your doors about you; hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment." There is nothing but love and sympathy and repose for the mourning, anguished spirit prostrate beneath the cross of Jesus. Its divine light is on you, its sacred shadow is over you, its invincible shield is around you. There Jesus speaks- "It is I; do not be afraid. I, who know a son's suffering and a mother's anguish. I, who control the winds and the waves, who stills the tempest and calm the sea. I, who have promised that my grace shall be sufficient, and that my strength shall be perfected in weakness. Approach my cross, shelter near my wounded side, get within my bleeding heart- there is love and there is room and there is rest for you there."

Tossed with rough winds, and faint with fear,
Above the tempest, soft and clear,
What still small accents greet my ear!
It is I; do not be afraid!

It is I who led your steps aright;
It is I who gave your blind eyes sight;
It is I, your Lord, your Life, your Light.
It is I; do not be afraid!

These raging winds, this surging sea,
Bear not a breath of wrath to thee;
That storm has all been spent on Me.
It is I; do not be afraid!

This bitter cup fear not to drink;
I know it well- oh! do not shrink;
I tasted it over Kedron's brink.
It is I; do not be afraid!

My eyes are watching by your bed,

My arms are underneath your head,
My blessing is around you shed.
It is I; do not be afraid!

When on the other side your feet
Shall rest mid thousand welcomes sweet.
One well-known voice your heart shall greet!
It is I; do not be afraid!

From out of the dazzling majesty,
Gently he'll lay His hand on thee,
Whispering, 'Beloved, do you love me?'
It is I; do not be afraid!"

Once more heed the exhortation- stand close to the cross of Jesus! It is the most accessible and precious spot this side of heaven- the most solemn and awesome one this side of eternity. It is the focus of divine love, sympathy, and power. Stand by it in suffering, in persecution, in temptation. Stand by it in the brightness of prosperity and in the gloom of adversity. Shrink not from its offence, humiliation, and woe. Defend it when scorned, despised, and denied. Stand up for Jesus and the gospel of Jesus. Oh, whatever you do, or whatever you endure, be loyal to Christ's cross. Go to it in trouble, repair to it in weakness, cling to it in danger, hide beneath it when the wintry storm rushes fiercely over you. Near to the cross, you are near a Father's heart, a Savior's side. You seem to enter the gate of heaven, to stand beneath the vestibule of glory. You "come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling."

Nothing but a believing proximity to the cross of Jesus brings the soul into a present fellowship with these gospel, precious, and transcendent blessings. Again, I reiterate the fact, that nothing but love will welcome your approach to the cross of Jesus- love that pardons all your sins, flows over all your unworthiness, heals all your wounds, soothes all your sorrows, and will shelter you within its blessed pavilion until earth is changed for heaven, and you lay down the warrior's sword for the victor's palm, and spring from the foot of the cross to the foot of the throne- "forever with the Lord."

Sweet the moments, rich in blessing,
Which before the cross I spend,
Life, and health, and peace possessing,
From the sinner's dying Friend.

Here I'll sit forever viewing

Mercy's streams, in streams of blood;
Precious drops! my soul bedewing,
Plead and claim my peace with God.

Truly blessed is this station,
Low before His cross to lie;
While I see divine compassion
Floating in His languid eye,

Here it is I find my heaven,
While upon the cross I gaze
Love I much? I've more forgiven;
I'm a miracle of grace.

Love and grief my heart dividing,
With my tears His feet I'll bathe,
Constant still in faith abiding;
Life deriving from His death.

May I still enjoy this feeling,
In all need to Jesus go;
Prove His blood each day more healing,
And Himself more fully know."

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